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## **Cultural Authority with a Light Touch – Museums Using Humor in Social Media Communication**

### **Abstract**

The distinctively informal and participatory environment of social media can help museums improve comprehension by providing new ways of seeing, interpreting and experiencing. A particular potential in that digital context may relate to a humorous discourse. Given that museum research has yet to explore the use of humor in social media communication, the aim of this article is to fill the gap by investigating how museums incorporate humor to communicate over the net with wide and fragmented audiences. The empirical study was based on a content analysis of messages posted on the social media profiles of museums from the Malopolska Region in Poland. The analysis involved material gathered from 71 institutions running proprietary social media sites (of a total 119 museums in the region), whose activity was observed during a two-and-a-half-month period. The final sample developed through a consensus coding procedure consisted of 47 humorous messages posted on profiles of 15 institutions. The findings identify certain common trends as well as differences in the use of humor in the social media communication of museums. Observed discrepancies relate to distinct framings and cohesiveness of practiced humorous communication. Along with a variety of humorous utterances different reactions of the audience were identified.

**Keywords:** museum, social media, humor, informal communication, audience

### **Introduction**

Dynamic social and technological changes have affected the contemporary understanding of the role of museums within communities (Camarero & Garrido, 2012). Improving the collective comprehension of the surrounding world (Stephen, 2001) involves traditional activities of collecting and presenting artifacts, yet even more important is to develop a museum space which elevates the importance of the context and appropriate narration for communicating the meaning of artifacts and for experience creation (e.g. Valdecasas, Correia & Correias, 2006). Such a space entails physical as well as virtual environments (Zafiroopoulos, Vrana & Antoniadis, 2015), and hence, induces new challenges for developing and maintaining effective

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communication with broad, diverse, and fragmented audiences (Meijer-van Mensch, 2011). It has been argued that the use of social media platforms can substantially enhance museums' efforts in addressing the growing participatory demands of audiences (Fletcher & Lee, 2012; Holdgaard & Klastrop, 2014; Russo, Watkins, Kelly & Chan, 2007). According to the extant research, interaction cultures of social media can help museums advance comprehension by providing new ways of experiencing culture (Russo, Watkins & Groundwater-Smith, 2009; Kim, 2018; Parry & Sawyer, 2005). Such an informal environment stresses the significance of the emotional component of communication, which may relate to humor (Baker & Cooley, 2018). However, although scholars recognize a positive linkage between museum and humor by highlighting its educational, aesthetic, and affiliative dimensions (Karpńska-Krakowiak & Modliński, 2018; Powell & Kokkranikal, 2014; Nuñez-Ramos & Lorenzo, 1997), humor has received relatively little research attention by scholars exploring communication and management of museums. Just a few studies highlight the potential of informal approaches within the museum space, like for example edutainment (Addis, 2005), yet these discussions relate almost exclusively to the traditional, physical exhibition area, leaving virtual environment underexplored. Hence, museum research has yet to explore the use of humor in social media communication. To address the gap, this study investigates the way in which museums incorporate humor in their social media communication. The implemented framing was based on a communication process perspective with recognized key components of the process, namely the presenter, the recipient, the message, the medium (Wood, Beckmann & Rossiter, 2011; Shifman, 2007). The empirical investigation was guided by a qualitative research design (Najda-Janoszka & Daba-Buzoianu, 2018), and based on the content analysis of messages posted on the social media profiles of museums localized in the Malopolska Region in Poland. The analysis involved material gathered from 71 institutions running proprietary social media sites (of a total 119 museums in the region), whose activity was observed during a two- and- a-half- month period. The final sample developed through a consensus coding procedure consisted of 47 humorous messages posted on profiles of 15 institutions. The results obtained reveal various framings and usage patterns of humorous content, which ignite different responses from audiences. By enhancing the understanding of how digitally produced and shared humor may enhance advancing the collective comprehension of the culture, this study contributes to the museum and communication literature.

The article is structured as follows. It begins with a discussion of the contemporary understanding of the role of museums and the place of humor within it. After discussing methodology and method, the narration shifts to findings exhibiting production of and response to humorous messages in the social media communication of museums. The study concludes with a discussion of the implications, focusing on the significance of different types and patterns of humorous utterance for developing an interactive communication between museums and audiences in the social media context.

## **Theoretical background**

The contemporary understanding of the role of the museum within the community goes far beyond traditional functions delimited to collecting and displaying (Stephen, 2001). Museums evolved from the mere "cabinets of curiosities" (Valdecasas et al., 2006) developed by elites for elites (Tröndle, Wintzerith, Wäspe & Tschacher, 2012) toward open institutions that

provide an important public benefit through improving comprehension of the surrounding world (Stephen, 2001). “Contributing to the advancement of the collective” (Stephen, 2001, p. 297) has brought at the forefront the utilitarian function of curating public education. Hence, the artifacts have remained a necessary, yet not sufficient condition for the very existence of a museum. The missing component has been recognized as a distinctive narration that enables appreciation of and reflection on the significance of those collected objects for visitors – individuals, as well as whole communities (Mencarelli, Marteaux & Pulh, 2010; Ramshaw, 2010). Hence, the audience-oriented museum has recently become a leading concept in the literature on the organization and management of museums (e.g. Camarero & Garrido, 2012; Winter, 2018; Najda-Janoszka & Sawczuk, 2018). It implies a distinct creation of a museum space, which raises the importance of the context and appropriate narration for communicating the meaning of artifacts and experience creation (e.g. Valdecasas et al., 2006). Instead of centering on artifacts, the attention of museums has shifted toward visitors considered as individual, active interpreters (Poisson-de-Haro, Normandin & Coblenz, 2013; McCall & Gray, 2014). The observed reorientation towards audience has broadened the spectrum of roles performed by museums, (e.g. tourist attraction, conference center, dining place, leisure place – Sheng & Chen, 2012; Greffe, Krebs & Pflieger, 2017), which have begun to compete for the attention not only with other cultural institutions, but also with organizations operating in broadly defined leisure and entertainment industries (e.g. Hume, 2011; Evans, Bridson & Rentschler, 2012).

Nevertheless, despite the expanding multiplicity of functions performed, education has remained the priority that can be supported and complemented by other activities (Stephen, 2001). Hence, in recent research on museums the attention has gravitated towards the concept of “edutainment” (Addis, 2005; Balloffet, Courvoisier & Lagier, 2014), i.e. providing education in the context of entertainment and amusement (e.g. Taheri & Jafari, 2012; Powell & Kokkranikal, 2014). Relevant discussions on issues of informality, free choice learning, use of digital media (Falk, Dierking & Adams, 2006; Anderson, 2012; Kidd, 2014) highlight also the challenge of addressing growing participatory demands from the audience while maintaining the role of curators as arbiters of culture (Meijer-van Mensch, 2011; López, Margapoti, Maragliano & Bove, 2010). Interestingly, the reconsideration of museum’s interaction with visitors in the area of education has been more often explored in the context of a traditional museum space, rather than virtual and social media environment (Bira, 2018; Budge & Burness, 2018), even though a dynamic growth of museums’ social media activity has been widely observed (Pett, 2012; Fletcher & Lee, 2012).

The unique interaction cultures of social media based on two-way conversations and largely informal framing can help museums improve comprehension not only by disseminating information but more importantly by providing new ways of seeing, interpreting and experiencing (Russo et al., 2009; Kim, 2018; Parry & Sawyer, 2005). Given that visitors’ engagement involves entangled dimensions of cognition and emotion (Smith & Campbell, 2015), a distinct informal and participatory environment of social media enables museums “to maintain a cultural dialogue with audiences in real time” (Russo et al., 2007, p. 22). A particular emotional impact of that communication process may relate to humor (Baker & Cooley, 2018), which generally refers to jocose imagination and treatment of a subject (Simpson & Weiner, 1989, p. 486), i.e. creation, perception of and response to an amusing stimulus (Martin, 2007). Hence, narrations developed by museums can embrace humorous stories, while audiences can respond in a playful convention and share humorous interpretations of culture (Golding,

2013). Scholars recognize a positive linkage between museum and humor by arguing that humor can be seen as education in a palatable form (Maslow, 1970, p. 170; Powell & Kokkranikal, 2014; Lester, Strachan & Derry, 2014; Karpińska-Krakowiak & Modliński, 2018), and as “one of the vehicles for the aesthetic experience to manifest itself in one of its purest forms” (Nuñez-Ramos & Lorenzo, 1997, p. 105). By introducing a certain reframing, it enables capturing unexpected incongruity and liberating individuals from the “unidirectionality of the conventional order of things” (Nuñez-Ramos & Lorenzo, 1997, p. 105). Nevertheless, museum research has yet to explore the use of humor in social media communication.

Given that people find different things humorous also to release a build-up tension, express superiority, interact with others (Martin, 2007; Lynch, 2002), humor can be explored as a communicative activity and a powerful mode of social influence (Martin, 2007). Such influence appears invaluable for entities struggling to cut through the overwhelming ocean of voices in the social media environment (Ge & Gretzel, 2017). Depending on its functional role, humor can lead to improved wellbeing, comprehension, persuasion, emotional connection (Weinberger & Gulas, 1992), but also to exclusion or disagreement (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006). According to Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, and Weir (2003) humor can be self-enhancing when it helps one to cope with real circumstances, affiliative when it seeks to enhance relationships, self-deprecating when used at the expense of one’s self, aggressive when intentionally ridiculing others. In the context of social media, the affiliative function has been recognized as the most important one (Ge & Gretzel, 2017; Holton & Lewis, 2011), as it refers to the potential of humor for initiating social interaction with both existing and potential audiences (Lynch, 2002; Curry & Dunbar, 2013). Such a positive humor (Martin et al., 2003) can be used to promote openness, encourage creative problem-solving, reduce social distance (Scheel & Gockel, 2017), yet also to communicate criticism in a socially acceptable way (Grugulis, 2002). However, given that humorous communication occurs in the context of social norms underlying the behavior of involved parties, it may induce considerable risks regarding image, social status or credibility (Bell, 2013; Bergeron & Vachon, 2008). A humorous utterance transmitted by social media channels “may travel across language and culture borders, complicating configurations of in-groups and out-groups and the follow-on joking transactions it spawns” (Weitz, 2016). Social norms concerning humorous content as well as circumstances considered appropriate for using humor may differ substantially across cultures (Martin, 2007). For example, using humor in a context of a rather sensitive thematic scope of a museum (e.g. martyrdom, historical) can be perceived as taboo in the case of an institutional utterance, yet acceptable in private conversations (Gulas & Weinberger, 2006). Hence, museums using humor to communicate with wide audiences through social media risk misinterpretation and possible negative reactions (Bell, 2013), which may challenge the museum’s communicating strategy. However, the evidence derived from systematic, empirical research on the subject matter is generally lacking. To fill that gap this study draws on the extant research on humor in organizational communication, marketing, advertising and education, to explore the humorous communication of museums in the specific context of social media. The implemented framing refers to a communication process perspective with the recognized key components of the presenter, the recipient, the message, and the medium (Wood et al., 2011; Shifman, 2007). Based on the above considerations, two research questions that structured the empirical analysis were formulated:

RQ1. In what manner museums use humor to communicate with the audience through social media?

RQ2. How do audiences react to humorous content provided on museums' social media sites?

## Methodology

The purpose of this study was to investigate the way in which museums incorporate humor in their social media communication. To address the research questions the study involved collecting data on social media communication of all museums located in the Malopolska Region in Poland. The region was selected on the basis of two main criteria, namely density and diversity of museums operating in a given territory. According to the Central Statistical Office of Poland, Malopolska ranks second among 16 Polish regions in terms of the number of museums and diversity of their thematic scope. Importantly, three out of the top five most visited museums in Poland are located in Malopolska – i.e., the UNESCO listed: Krakow Saltworks in Wieliczka, Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial, and Wawel Royal Castle (<https://stat.gov.pl/obszary-tematyczne/kultura-turystyka-sport/kultura/kultura-w-2017-roku,20,1.html> , access: 01.11.2019). To define the investigated population the register of the National Institute for Museums and Public Collections in Poland was used. The developed list of 119 museums included independent entities, as well as branches and subsidiaries, assuming that formal dependency and subordination may not necessarily prevent individual practices in the area of communication. The investigated population of museums varied according to the ownership structure as well as thematic scope of the exhibition (Table 1).

Table 1. Investigated museums

Museum type	Total quantity	Profiles on SM platforms	Humorous messages
<b>TOTAL</b>	119	71	15
<i>Ownership</i>			
– state owned	17	7	5
– regional owned	74	48	8
– private owned	24	13	2
– co-owned	4	4	0
<i>Thematic scope</i>			
– historical	13	7	1
– martyrdom	1	1	0
– military	3	3	0
– artistic	23	10	5
– ethnographic and open-air	14	10	0
– archaeological	2	1	0
– technology and science	9	6	3
– regional	26	18	3
– biographical	8	3	0
– other	12	7	1
– interdisciplinary	8	5	2

Data were collected from museums' official social media sites in mid-June, July and August 2019. Out of the total population of 119 museums located in Malopolska, 71 entities with proprietary profiles on social media platforms were selected for the content analysis. Given the focus of the study, the remaining 48 museums that only had a website, unofficial social media sites, or no online presence at all were excluded from the inquiry. The investigation involved collecting messages – “containers of content” (Krippendorf, 2004, p 2) – posted on services used by the surveyed museums: Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, Pinterest, Flickr, Vimeo, Snapchat, and proprietary blogs. Gathered material consisted of image, video and text posts and comments being part of conversational interaction on a given social media site. To identify the humorous content exhibited in messages a formal coding protocol was designed. To minimize the risk of subjective bias, coding was performed according to a consensus coding procedure – first by two researchers independently, then after comparison of obtained results, joint work until reaching the agreement on the final coded data set. Gathered material was coded using dichotomous values for the message presence (i.e. 0 – no humorous message, 1 – humorous message present). Further, the identified 47 messages underwent a qualitative content analysis (Krippendorf, 2004), which involved reading systematically through the gathered data, developing categories of text-based, image-based and mixed-approach humorous posts, and identifying patterns of context-bound humor applications and interactions between museums and audiences, which appeal to humor.

## Findings

Given that 60 percent of the total population of 119 museums operating in the Malopolska Region had official, proprietary social media websites, the content analysis covered messages posted on profiles of 71 museums. The gathered data indicated different modes and patterns of interactive communication incorporated by those museums (Table 2). One of the used modes refers to humor, which was identified in 47 messages posted on social media sites of 15 institutions. That group consisted of 13 individual/main entities and two branches (Zwierzyniecki House in Krakow; The Princes Czartoryski Museum in Krakow).

Table 2. Modes of interactive communication

	Interactivity components							
	Crowd-sourcing	Open questions	Quizzes	Contests	Humorous posts	Videos	Celebrity/influencer engagement	Discussions
<b>No.</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>%</b>	<b>21%</b>	<b>30%</b>	<b>9%</b>	<b>13%</b>	<b>21%</b>	<b>47%</b>	<b>4%</b>	<b>42%</b>

Although interactive efforts were observed across the used social media platforms, i.e. Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, Pinterest, Flickr, Vimeo, Snapchat, and proprietary blogs, humorous communication was observed only on the Facebook, Instagram and Twitter profiles. Moreover, as Facebook served as a primary social media platform for the investigated museums, meaning that without a profile on Facebook there was very little chance of observing any activity on other social media channels, it also represented the main medium

for humorous posting. Among the 15 museums that introduced humor into social media conversations with audiences, those characterized by an artistic thematic scope exhibited the highest activity in that respect (Table 1). It was also observed that state-owned museums were more likely to engage in humorous conversations – five out of seven state-owned museums having proprietary social media profiles.

Table 3. Investigated humorous messages

Feature	Number
Form	
– text based	6
– image based	6
– text-image based	35
Location	
– main posts	40
– comments	7
Topic	
– museum’s thematic scope	27
– side-threaded	20

The identified humorous messages differ in form (text-based, image-based, mixed), location (main post, comments) and topic used. Regarding the form, the mixed approach was most often applied, followed by the text and image based humorous content (Table 3). Purely linguistic humor cases were observed in the commenting section, e.g. discussion on the painting “Lady with an Ermine” by Leonardo da Vinci (Facebook profile of the National Museum in Krakow, July 17<sup>th</sup>):

AF: When my son was little, he used to say that it is a Lady with a Vixen!  
NMK: AF can be also this way, basically it’s also a bit bearish... 😊

Humorous posts involving images relied basically on the static rather than moving ones. There were only two video posts identified that conveyed a humorous content. Short, animated videos were created by National Museum in Krakow and Tatra Museum from Zakopane. In the first case, the posted animated video with a narrator (curator) presented the answer to a previously asked question and was used to strengthen a displayed invitation to visit the museum (Facebook profile of the National Museum in Krakow, July 17<sup>th</sup>). In the second case, the main purpose of the animation was to invite the audience to the organized contest by presenting a humorous confrontation between the cultural heritage of the region and available souvenir offerings (Figure 1). Further, both examples also illustrate a commonly observed practice among investigated museums, namely combining humor with different interactive modes– e.g. humorous posts with open questions, crowdsourcing, contests.



Fig.1. Animated humorous video created by the Tatra Museum (Facebook profile, July 24<sup>th</sup>).

**Muzeum Tatrzańskie w Zakopanem**  
24 lipca · 🌐

Stwórz projekt pamiątki z Zakopanego: wygraj 10 000 zł i wykorzystaj szansę zrealizowania swojego pomysłu!  
Sprawdź 📄 <http://muzeumtatrzańskie.pl/konkurs-pamiatka-z-zakopanego/>

Create a design of a souvenir from Zakopane: win PLN 10 000 and use the opportunity to realize your idea!

Check -  
<http://muzeumtatrzańskie.pl/konkurs-pamiatka-z-zakopanego/>

**Wyobraź sobie,  
że jedziesz na urlop do  
ZAKOPANEGO**

**Imagine  
that you go on holiday to  
ZAKOPANE**

👍❤️ 36      1 komentarz 16 udostępnień

Regarding messages of a mixed approach various combinations of visual and textual elements were observed. In most cases images and texts were inserted in a message as separate yet interrelated components, i.e. photographs, own or obtained from the network, conveying a humorous meaning accompanied by a short funny written text (Facebook profile of Museum of Rescue in Krakow, August 23<sup>rd</sup>), or standard photographs of museum's artifacts accompanied by convention-breaking, meme-like descriptions related to everyday situations (Figure 2 and 3).

Fig. 2. Image-text based humorous message posted by the Wawel Royal Castle (Facebook profile, August 6<sup>th</sup>).

**Zamek Królewski na Wawelu**  
6 sierpnia 2019 · 🌐

Trochę wawelskiej mody na dziś... 😊

📄 W czasach średniowiecza funkcjonowały na wawelskim wzgórzu wyspecjalizowane warsztaty szewskie. Potwierdzają to liczne fragmenty obuwia, które zostały odnalezione podczas wykopalisk archeologicznych. Poniżej dwie pary çizemek średniowiecznych wykonanych ze skóry. Można je zobaczyć na wystawie „Wawel Zaginiony”.

A bit of Wawel fashion for today ... 😊

📄 Specialized shoemakers' workshops operated on the Wawel hill in the Middle Ages. This is confirmed by numerous fragments of footwear that were found during archaeological excavations. Below are two pairs of medieval crochets made of leather. You can see them at the "Lost Wawel" exhibition.






Fig.3. Image-text based humorous message posted by the National Museum in Krakow (Instagram profile, June 20<sup>th</sup>).



There were also more sophisticated humorous productions observed, that appeared substantially more demanding with regard to technical and creative skills. In those messages images and text were intertwined, in a way resulting in the creation of a new artistic piece (e.g. old photos converted into retro styled posters with a rhymed announcement regarding renting an apartment – Facebook profile of the National Museum in Krakow, August 13<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup>). This type of humorous content was created by the National Museum in Krakow in particular. The museum created a series of short comic narratives to present art on Instagram profile (Fig. 4). Those comics conveyed humor through the narrative, original wordplays, comic framing, surprising punch line, and the very title of the work itself, e.g. *Good sides. A sociologically optimistic comics* (August 26<sup>th</sup>); *Mindfulness. Comic about looking at things* (August 19<sup>th</sup>). Such unconventional humorous messages were very enthusiastically received by the audience – from 263 to 942 likes, and from 6 to 24 comments. Hence, the museum engaged in a regular comic production and has begun to post one new comic per week since the end of July.

Fig 4. Comic story produced and posted by the National Museum in Krakow (Instagram profile, July 29<sup>th</sup>).



Regarding the topics covered in humorous messages there were two broad categories identified, namely those related to the area of core museum activities and those referring to side themes, rather loosely or not at all related to the museums' thematic scope. The first category included:

- messages announcing an upcoming exhibition or event (e.g. Instagram profile of the MOC AK, July 10<sup>th</sup>; Instagram profile of the Tatra Museum, August 26<sup>th</sup>);
- presentations of own artifacts with surprising, playful and inspiring comments (e.g. comic story with artwork and an unexpected punch line *"Sometimes it is worth to find in the people, what is the best"* – Instagram profile of the National Museum in Krakow, August 26<sup>th</sup>; playful description of job pharmacist – Facebook profile of the Jagiellonian University Museum in Krakow, August 18<sup>th</sup>);
- messages presenting artifacts not belonging to the museum's collection, but closely themed to its profile (e.g. photos of medical equipment, emergency transport obtained from other accounts – Facebook profile of Museum of Rescue in Krakow, July 29<sup>th</sup>, August 21<sup>st</sup>, August 23<sup>rd</sup>; comic story with the Wawel Dragon – Instagram profile of the Manggha Museum in Krakow, June 14<sup>th</sup>);
- presentations of the museum's backstage (e.g. delivery of artifacts to the museum – *Do you like getting packages? We really like, especially if there are salt shakers inside ☺*, Instagram profile of the Cracow Saltworks Museum in Wieliczka, July 31<sup>st</sup>).

The second topic category of humorous content entailed a diverse spectrum of themes:

- messages referring to weather or leisure time (e.g. photo of the upcoming storm clouds with comment *'It's coming'* – Facebook profile of the Wawel Royal Castle, June 21<sup>st</sup>; photograph of a child with a comment ☺ *What? Already vacation?* ☺, Facebook profile of the Museum of Photography in Krakow, June 19<sup>th</sup>);
- posts informing about animals sheltered by museums (e.g. Facebook profile of the Zwierzyniecki House in Krakow, July 17<sup>th</sup>; Facebook profile of the Niepolomickie Museum in Niepolomice, August 7<sup>th</sup>);
- messages referring to regional community issues (e.g. promoting a contest for a souvenir related with the Podhale region and Zakopane – Facebook profile of the Tatra Museum, July 25<sup>th</sup>; informing about a cleaning action in the Tatra Mountains – Facebook profile of the Tatra Museum, July 7<sup>th</sup> – Figure 5).

Fig. 5. Humorous post referring to an environmental action posted on the Facebook profile of the Tatra Museum (July 7<sup>th</sup>).

POKAŻMY POLAKOM, JAK NIE ŚMIECIĆ I ZOSTAWMY  
**CZYSTETATRY**  
 ZAKOPANE 26-27 LIPCA 2019



LET'S SHOW POLES HOW TO  
 NOT LITTER AND LEAVE  
 CLEAN TATRAS  
 ZAKOPANE 26-27 JULY 2019

- And I told my dad to clean  
 up after the picnic.

Although the first category was more numerous represented (27 messages in the sample), involving humorous side threads in the conversation was not much rarer (20 messages in the sample). Among those side threaded posts animal-oriented content was particularly visible. While three investigated museums exhibited such practice (Niepolomickie Museum in Niepolomice, Wawel Royal Castle and Zwierzyniecki House in Krakow), one of them raised the bar to the level of pretending a cat to be the manager of the museum's Facebook profile. The Zwierzyniecki House in Krakow placed a cat in its profile picture and introduced a first person narrative of a cat (named Wlodek) in posted messages (Facebook profile, August 30<sup>th</sup>):

MH: I see that Wlodek is active in the field of promotion :-)

Zwierzyniecki House: Well, that's why I'm here :)

TL: Wlodek, you take all the light! :-)

Zwierzyniecki House: I wonder how to answer the survey questions, I need to focus. And the light is just by the way;)

TL: How is he?

Zwierzyniecki House: Quite good, you can come and see for yourself.

Apart the staged humorous utterances exhibited in leading posts, museums introduced humor into direct conversations with audiences as well (utterances containing only emoticons were not considered for the in-depth analysis). Importantly, participation in discussions covered not only answering explicit questions directed towards museums, but also engaging in off-script conversations between individual visitors (e.g. Facebook profile of the National Museum in Krakow, July 11<sup>th</sup>):

SH: Sebastian Maurycy ☺

KK: But he is a bit lacking for a saint ☺

National Museum in Krakow: Either you are a saint or you go to a museum... ☺

KK: He's on the best path to do it ;- ) Max 15 years and you have him in your collection ☺

National Museum in Krakow: We are watching the artist, maybe something will happen ☺

Examples of playful messages identified among posted comments also reflected the way museums addressed critical remarks and released the tension at the same time (e.g. Facebook profile of the National Museum in Krakow, August 21<sup>st</sup>):

JM: Szymanowski would definitely not like the accordion concert. Aesthetic crease could have only be erased by the beauty of the gentlemen musicians.

National Museum in Krakow: It may be, although people are changing. Who knows, maybe today he would open up to sharp techno ☺ ?

JM: Yes! It is possible that he would accept harsh techno (in good company). But these accordions not at all.

National Museum in Krakow: The discussion continues and opinions are divided. It's hard to decide. Maybe something will be explained at the concert. (...) In September, a concert "At Karol's from Atma"- maybe he will forgive ☺ ?

While museums put an effort to respond to critical comments – all of them were addressed also with the use of humorous convention – there were a few cases identified, when a question referring to museum's initiated playful post was left unanswered (e.g. below a post with a picture of a cat in front of a historic tower – *Okay, what century does this cat come from?* – Facebook profile of the Wawel Royal Castle, June 18<sup>th</sup>; a series of posts with photos marked by unknown authorship – *"So many good photos were made by this "unknown photographer"*

:) *And this is another one made by him.... or her?* – Instagram profile of the Museum of the Photography in Krakow, August 21<sup>st</sup>).

Nevertheless, the majority of analyzed conversations involving humor illustrated interaction and engagement of both sides. Generally, all playful messages posted by museums met with positive reactions from audiences, however, those reactions differed with regard to type and scale. Audiences addressed all museums humorous utterances that appeared in the comment section with corresponding playful re-comments. In case of main posts audiences were more willing to respond with likes and sharing, than with commenting. Liking was in the range of 36-942, and on average was higher than for other, regular posts on museums' social media sites. The highest scores (263-942) were indicated for artistic comic stories posted on Instagram by the National Museum in Krakow. Moreover, those posts also received a higher than the average number of comments (6-25), which exhibited not only appreciation of the content provided by museums but also references to and own opinions on presented artifacts, interpretations (e.g. *Cones, forest, once again, branch, stream, tangle of thought, a solution there is not... Thoughts follow the sight path, there is no difference in the crucible of even-colored spots, I tell you ...* – Instagram profile of the National Museum in Krakow, July 29<sup>th</sup>; *I chose the gentleman with the dog. Why? The dog sat on his coat and he does not chase him away. A nice gentleman* – Instagram profile of the National Museum in Krakow, August 26<sup>th</sup>).

## Discussion

The results of this research support the idea that museums can use humor to enhance communication with audiences in the social media context. Although only 15 museums out of the 71 institutions having proprietary social media profiles practiced humorous posting, the efforts of those active museums can be considered promising. The larger on average number of likes, shares and comments for humorous messages presented on museums' social media profiles corresponds with arguments that humor on social media can help communicators get through the ocean of voices by effectively drawing and perpetuating attention of audiences (Shifman, 2007; Ge & Gretzel, 2017). Moreover, by creating affiliation between interlocutors a humorously framed communication can enhance more active engagement of audiences reflected in posted comments. While gained likes reflect recognition and approval of a particular content, "comments are the most cognitively and behaviorally demanding form of engagement" because they involve processing of the provided content, reflecting on it and formulating an opinion in one's own words, i.e. adding new content (Ge & Gretzel, 2017, p. 463). According to our results humorous messages posted by museums differ with regard to form, location and topics, and such a variety brings in also a variety in reactions to those messages (Martin, 2007; Gulas & Weinberger, 2006). It was observed that the investigated museums were more willing to use mixed, text-image based messages for main posts. Among those messages posts that went beyond funny images and exhibited a more creative approach (even to the extent of creating new artistic products), received highest levels of approval and more effectively triggered audiences to submit opinions. Introduced playful perspectives for interpreting art, accompanied by the background explanatory information regarding a particular art piece, quite clearly correspond with the view of humor as education in a palatable form (Maslow, 1970; Karpińska-Kraskowiak & Modliński, 2018). The scale and type of the response received suggests that the implemented convention breaking approaches that reframed the classical,

unidirectional understanding of a subject matter positively affect comprehension and can also unleash creativity (Nuñez-Ramos & Lorenzo, 1997; Russo et al., 2009). Hence, museums can use the potential of humorous content to influence comprehension, attitudes and behavior of the audience (Wood et al., 2011). Nevertheless, given the role of museums within the community, the important thing is to judiciously balance the humorous and non-humorous parts of the communication (Wood et al., 2011) to avoid risking a decrease of respect due to overusing the jocular component (Powell & Andresen, 1985). Moreover, a particular status of a museum and its thematic scope may completely exclude humor as being in conflict with accepted social norms (Gulas & Weinberger, 2006) – in the collected material not a single example of a humorous utterance was found among martyrdom or military museums.

Among the investigated 15 museums in just two institutions using humor in social media communication could be described as regular and with a strategic intent. Other museums reached for humorous utterances rather occasionally, leaving an impression of an ad-hoc decision, yet involving a pre-produced content. In case of the National Museum in Krakow, which exhibited the highest intensity and creativity in humorous content production, the observed practice reflected a well thought-out communication strategy in which the use of humor had a specific place and function. Importantly, the museum properly aligned the level of creativity in posted messages to its audience, bearing in mind that too creative humor may fail due to misinterpretation, misunderstanding and thus lack of, or negative response (Bell, 2013). Another museum that exhibited a continuous reliance on humorous communication was the Zwierzyniecki House in Krakow. Unlike the previous example, that museum posted mainly funny photos (Shifman, 2007) with a cat, which additionally was presented as a narrator and manager of the website. Such practice complies with a global popularity and appreciation of jokes involving animals acting as humans (Shifman, 2007). However, intentional use of such humorous content by a museum induces considering the type and form of audience's reaction. Given the popular animal-theme, it was not a surprise to observe relatively high numbers of likes and comments provided. Nevertheless, posted comments referred almost exclusively to a cat and scarcely to the merits of a message. Hence, the attention was drawn to peripheral information rather than to important concepts entailed in a message (Martin, 2007). The framing which was used enhanced affiliation more than the comprehension. That finding closely corresponds with arguments on careful selection of the area the humor should refer to, when attempting to use humor intentionally or for educational purposes (Wood et al., 2011). Generally, humorous communication aiming at comprehension advancement and distance minimization was observed among artistic and science-oriented institutions (e.g. National Museum in Krakow, Princes Czartoryski Palace in Krakow, Jagiellonian University Museum in Krakow), while using playful content to build interpersonal relationships and strengthen open communication on locally important issues was more often practiced by smaller museums with rather limited collections (e.g. Tatra Museum in Zakopane, Zwierzyniecki House in Krakow; Niepolomickie Museum in Niepolomice). When considering actual conversation occurring in the comment section, humorous tone in museums' utterances was rather uncommon. A few cases we observed confirmed the potential of non-staged, off-script humor for addressing critique in a subtle manner, enhancing understanding for certain actions, releasing tension, and fostering socialization (Grugulis, 2002). Again, the National Museum in Krakow, which exhibited the most professional, cohesive approach to social media communication, provided most examples of conversational humor. Hence, it recalls the basic



premise of contemporary museum communication – if the museum aims to engage audiences, it should firstly engage itself (Camarero, Garrido & San Jose, 2018).

## Conclusions

This study provided a rich evidence informing that introducing a non-serious discourse in the museum narration can be a viable and beneficial approach. The extant literature highlights the importance of an audience-oriented museum and “edutainment”, however the presented discussions refer to those concepts predominantly in the context of traditional museum exhibitions (Budge & Burness, 2018; Addis, 2005). This research broadens the literature on museums and communication by looking at the humorous communication of museums in the specific context of social media. It provides insights into various forms of humor utterances used by museums on their social media profiles, which reflect diverse intents and functions in the communication process. Moreover, the results we obtained also illustrate the differences in audiences’ reaction to particular types of humorous content provided by museums. Hence, these insights shed more light on the way humor may enhance advancing the collective understanding of culture.

The study has potential limitations, which refer to the regional scope of the research and the limited timeframe. The chosen region of Malopolska represents one of the 16 regions in Poland, hence, the research sample might be affected by a regional bias. However, Malopolska is characterized by a highly diversified population of museums, and thus allows an inference about practices of museums of regional, national, and international importance. Moreover, the analysis covered the whole population of museums operating in Malopolska. Regarding the second limitation, the two-and-a-half-month period of investigation was conveniently selected as representing peak tourist season and further because a relatively short period of data collection minimizes the risk of possible content changes. Therefore, the defined time-frame enhanced the reliability of the data collected for this study. However, further research conducted in a periodic manner over a longer time could provide more evidence regarding behavioral patterns and strategic approaches in the area of humorous communication of museums through social media.

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